

## THE JOY OF GENEROSITY

→ How many of you, I wonder, have ever felt yourself being really inspired to do something after you've watched another person? Maybe when the Olympics were on last year you were motivated to get back into a sport that you'd left behind or you took the decision to get more exercise? Perhaps you've noticed someone that works alongside you take up a training opportunity and they came back into the workplace with their skills sharpened up and you've resolved that at some point next year you're going to follow suit? Or maybe a friend has talked to you about their experience of giving blood, or volunteering with a charity or going into school to help children with reading and you've been inspired to go out and do just the same thing?

.....And you really mean it, don't you? You're really excited about the difference that these changes are going to make to your life. But then work gets busy and the kids or the grandchildren need more of your time and the garden could do with some attention and you're not quite so sure how you're going to fit in the training course. And the volunteering with a charity, well, they'll still need someone next month. You'll think about it again then ... and before you know it all those good intentions have disappeared like a puff of smoke!

.....Recognise that scenario? Or is it just me? Well, me ... and a bunch of Christians from Corinth! Around about the year 50AD, a group of people who had formed a church community in Macedonia heard about the suffering that was happening in Jerusalem. A terrible famine had hit the people there and the Macedonians wanted to help. They were very poor people, but out of what little they had, they managed to collect together a gift and they sent it to those who were worse off than they were.

.....That was an amazing thing to observe. At least that's what the Christians in Corinth thought. As they watched the Macedonians making huge sacrifices and sending a gift that saved lives and gave hope to the starving Jews, they were inspired to do the same. They decided it was time for them to join in with everyone else that was sending aid to Jerusalem. But, sadly, they got distracted and all their good intentions went out of the window and the passage of scripture that we've heard this morning was the apostle Paul's attempt to inspire them again.

.....He wants to encourage them to get back on track and turn those good intentions into action, to open their wallets and engage in some joyful, generous giving. So he writes a letter in which he's both blunt and diplomatic, a letter in which he both encourages them and challenges them to turn their good intentions into concrete action. And I suppose, in many senses that's exactly what I hope to do this morning. I want to both acknowledge, give thanks for and encourage the tremendous generosity that is already evident within this church family, but I also want to challenge you to do even more so that all of us experience the joy of generous living, rather than the burden of meeting what we feel is a demand and so that the community around us has an even greater opportunity to hear about the love of God because we are able to fulfil the vision and purpose that God has for us.

→ You see, if we're not careful, responding to God's generosity towards us, giving a generous proportion of our income to God's church and sharing our riches,

can become for us exactly what it had become for those Corinthian Christians – something that seems like a good idea, but one that we never quite get around to doing or something that we did once but we've never really thought about our giving that often and so it's never kept up with our income.

.....And as we begin to think about this, it's perhaps important to remind ourselves of the immense generosity of God towards us. Everyday we enjoy the benefits of the creation around us and the rolling around of the seasons. We all have talents and abilities inside us and compared to a huge number of people in this world we have an immense supply of resources and wealth in our hands. But none of this is actually ours! It's all a gift to us from our lavish, generous God who longs for us to be lavish and generous with what he has given to us!

..... But somehow, sometimes, there's some kind of blockage between what's going on in our hearts as we think about God's goodness and generosity to us and how we respond to that with our credit cards and cheque books. There's a temptation for all of us to live like everyone else around us and getting sucked into the cycle of spending, using and enjoying. Oh, we may not do it intentionally, but we get distracted from what really ought to be our priority: our relationship with God and how we serve him with all that we have and are, not least with our money.

→ So, that brings us neatly to Paul's encouragement to the Corinthian Christians to turn their intentions into reality and to be joyful, generous givers. And there are three things that I'd like us to consider this morning. First of all, our attitude to giving, secondly the dynamic of giving and thirdly the results of our giving. So, let's begin with the attitude of giving which rings through in this passage from 2 Corinthians. It's there right in those first two verses that we read – sowing generously, giving deliberately and doing both of those things cheerfully.

.....Who remembers that L'Oreal advertisement that used to tell us "You're worth it!" You're worth it so come and spend a fortune on our cosmetics! And of course, the message of the gospel for all of us is that we are valuable, loved, cherished and accepted by Christ. In that sense and in God's eyes, we're worth a great deal! But, the trouble is when we begin to focus on what we're worth and what we feel we deserve then we begin to think that we deserve that expensive holiday or two or three every year, and of course it's our right to be able to eat out several times a month, and yes, we should be able to drive around in a smart car. But if we start to think like that, then the challenge to give to God and give to others makes us feel a little uncomfortable because suddenly we come face to face with the thought that other people are worth it too. We come face to face with the notion that God gives lavishly and generously to us, not because we're worth it, but just because he wants to give. He loves to see our lives blessed and enriched and restored and he wants us to give so that others have that experience too.

..... So, perhaps a really good place for any of us to be when we're thinking about our response to God is right here in front of the cross, the place where Jesus gave himself for us. If we linger at the cross and look at it for long enough remembering all that Jesus did for us, then it's hard to keep our hands tightly around our stuff. Because the more we look at the cross and the more we allow our hearts and our minds to be moved by what God did in Christ on the cross then the more

open our hands and our hearts will become. Looking at the cross makes joyful, generous giving possible, dare I say, even easy!

→ Then, secondly, Paul helps us to think about the dynamic of giving and this is really important because so often it seems to be misunderstood. Our giving to God isn't some kind of investment strategy where we take account of what we're going to get in return. The whole motivation behind it isn't about what we might get back; it's all about trusting God, expressing our love for God. Our giving is about expressing our gratitude for what God has done for us in Jesus and about saying thank you for all the blessings that he has already provided.

.....But the Bible does suggest that as we grow in our giving, we'll experience God's blessing in our lives. In fact verse 11 says "He will always make you rich." But why does God do that? Well read on ... God will always make you rich enough to be generous at all times, so that many will thank God for your gifts." You see, we're called to be generous with everything that God gives to us, so the more we give, the more we'll be blessed and the more we'll be called to continue being generous.

→ And that leads me neatly to the final point that Paul makes and that's to speak about the results of our giving. What actually happens when we practice joyful, generous giving? We can find the answer in the final verses that we heard this morning. Our giving transforms the lives of others and causes them to be thankful. We can see that easily when we give money to dig a well and provide clean water for an African village or we give cans and packets of food to support the project in Wythenshawe. But in just the same way when God calls us to give a generous proportion of our income to the church, exactly the same thing happens because the more generous we all are, the more lives we can touch in this community.

.....The young Mums who come to our Baby chat group speak of the immense support and care that provides when they spend so many hours in the week on their own with a child. The many people that are visited in their homes and encouraged to feel part of this community because of that continuing contact is priceless. The work that we do in the schools passing on the message of the gospel to hundreds of children who would otherwise never hear it is wonderful. The lunches provided for folk of all ages every week through Cameo and Friendly Food is great. The Christianity Explored Course that provides people with an opportunity to ask questions about and find faith for themselves is life changing. All that you give helps us to do all of that and much more besides.

.....But we could do so much more and in an even more generous fashion if we were all even more generous than we are currently being. We could transform even more lives in this community and hear even more people being thankful to God because of what this church offers to this community.

.....So, our generous giving changes other people's lives and causes them to be thankful to God, but it can also increase our own faith in God. It's a fairly well known fact that the more we have, the more we want. And the more we get, the more we hold onto it. But when we give away anything, we begin to loosen our hold on what we have and as we see the results of our giving, we're encouraged to be even more

generous and we begin to trust God more to provide all that we need. He's promised to do that and he will and when we're being generous with what we have we become even more aware of just how much we can trust God to provide for us.

→ Over the last few days many of you may have received a letter from me, perhaps a little like the one that Paul wrote to the Christians in Corinth and if you haven't got it yet, you'll be getting it very shortly. It's a letter that encourages us all to consider just how generous we are really being in our giving to God through the church. It's a letter that reminds us of all that's already being achieved here but of so much more that we could do if we would all be lavish and generous in our response. God has given us the vision and all that so often gets in the way of fulfilling the vision is our lack of willingness to be generous. So, as one pastor once said to his congregation, I encourage you as you think about God's generosity to you and you consider your response to God's word today and to the letter that you have received to "give till it hurts, then give till it stops hurting and then keep on giving until it feels good as we thank God for his indescribable gift to us!"